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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the diverse facts that influence the information seeking behavior of women in India, including: (1) the type of information women need; (2) social factors (i.e., caste, class, urban/rural, literate/illiterate, educated/uneducated); (3) economic factors (i.e., employed, unemployed, employed in organized sector, employed in the unorganized sector, self-employed, and homemaker) and (4) familial norms and hierarchy. Following an introduction, the first section discusses the hierarchical structure of the Indian society, including five categories of women and their information needs: urban elite; educated urban middle class; educated rural elite; educated rural/semi-urban middle class; and uneducated rural poor. The second section considers the role of the librarian and information professional, including well-developed modern library and information dissemination facilities, public libraries in the new information-seeking environment, and information/communication centers at the rural level. The paper ends with a brief discussion of the right to information and the need for research. (MES)

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Information Needs of Women: Addressing Diverse Factors in the Indian Context

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The information needs of women and their views on available information have hardly been studied as a research topic or as a critical issue within the information system. It is surely a pity that the need for information and access to information for women have not been taken as a serious matter in the field of library and information services. In the Indian context it is even more so because other than the academic and scientific sector where information is a scholarly commodity and the user is a serious information seeker whether a man or a women, the information need of an ordinary woman is seldom understood or appreciated. The status of women being a major subject of debate in India is dependent on several factors. However, in this paper I wish to address the diverse factors which will ultimately influence the information seeking behaviour of women:

(i) What information do women need? This concept of information need can be of different types. Need for traditional information and need for personal and other development oriented information. In the Indian context there are diverse factors which influence information need of women and their information seeking pattern. The social, economic and familial factors mostly influence women's behaviour in India.

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(ii) In the social sector the following factors are of prime importance.

a) caste, b) class, c) urban, d) rural, e) literate/educated, f) illiterate/ uneducated

(iii) The economic sector faces another set of diversity:

a) employed, b) unemployed, c) employed in organized sector, d) employed in the unorganized sector, e) self employed, and f) house wife

(iv) India being a family oriented society, the women's lives are greatly influenced by the familial norms and hierarchy. This mainly accounts for women oriented issues such as health, parenting and child care, domestic requirements and house keeping, family planning, legal security, crime and safety, migration and mobility.

Hierarchical structure of the Indian society

Indian society has had a hierarchical structure as a part of the Hindu religion. The caste hierarchies have been spelt out with religious approval. Therefore, in a society divided on the basis of caste hierarchy, women in each caste generally hold the lowest position. However, historically the status of women has depended over a period of time on factors such as regional development, matriarchy, British penetration, women's education, social reforms and economic independence. However, a dichotomy prevails in the field of economic independence. The lower caste women have historically been economically independent in the real sense of the term. The 20th century saw changes in the socio-economic condition of women within the caste and class structure. Therefore, the diversity can be narrowed down to basically five categories of women while discussing their information needs:

a) Urban elite
b) Educated urban middleclass,
c) Educated rural elite,
d) Educated rural/semi urban middleclass,
e) Uneducated rural poor.

These categories of women have different types of information need and its use according to the social, economic and familial structure.

Urban educated elite

This group of women have specific information needs which encompass information regarding educational particulars, career and other counseling, legal rights and aid, self-awareness, high standards of consumerism, house keeping, recreation and culture, etc. These women are part of the higher rung of the socio-economic ladder and generally enjoy social and economic security.

Urban educated middleclass

The women of this class of Indian citizens are facing the maximum difficulties within the social system because they face the problems such as discrimination, sexism and violence. However, they strive within the traditional system to come up to a level which will help them to change their status. Though their main concern is the traditional womanly approaches to life, they have specific requirements for information on education and schooling, health, social security, discrimination and gender relations, childcare and family relationships, family planning and birth control, legal aid, house keeping and house hold maintenance and more. Women of this group often work in the organized sector at the middle level. The job opportunities availed of are mainly traditional in nature and usually those which are not likely to tilt the economic scenario of the familial hierarchical structure. In this group many women are home based workers or house wives which makes them invisible and their information needs inconsequential to many academic research. These women unfortunately face maximum social pressures which are often insurmountable. They face discrimination since birth, are victims of dowry problems and are constantly facing discrimination at all levels. They need the broadest spectrum of information concerning gender sensitization, legal awareness/aid/facilities, economic/employment opportunities, education and career orientations. These women need information support to break loose the gripping socio-economic and familial stereotypes.

Educated semi-urban/rural middleclass

Socio economic development has influenced the lives of the women residing on the periphery of the urban society i.e. the suburban areas and in forward-looking rural society. The women here face similar problems and discriminations faced by their urban middleclass counterparts but the grip of the double standards of a traditional society is much more. The young women are exposed to formal education mainly because education upto a level has better marriage prospect. Majority of these women are expected to follow all traditional norms of behaviour without challenging any of it. To get them out of that stupor exposure to information about their innumerable rights and opportunities will have to be given.

Educated rural elite

A large majority of Indians are still within the feudal structure of the village society. The village of the yester years has seen a very systematic growth of feudal families which were the elites in villages in different parts of India. These families are very highly educated and cultured in their breeding and many well-known men and women of India have come from this background. During and after the social reform movements in the 19th century and the uprising for India's independence in the early 20th century women of these families were actively involved in these activities. The information needs of these women were surely at par with their men though the caste structure and family hierarchy remained very rigid in spite of the liberalization process.

The educated rural elite had a very different information requirement from the rest of the rural society. Their women were gradually educated and sent to cities for education. They were involved in reformatory activities in the women's movement and in the Independence movement of India. Historically also even before the British or the colonial days and spreading of western education among women, the women of the rural elite often used information in a very systematic manner because the rural women looked up to these wives, mothers and daughters of elitist families as teachers and instructors and benevolent persons within the social structure. Therefore, the information requirement of women in the village society were often channelized through these elitist women. Unfortunately this very effective class of women is fast receding from the rural scenario because the younger generation of these families have migrated to the urban sector and have become visitors to the rural society.

Uneducated Rural Poor

In this category the caste and class structure get totally merged. The poor women in a village society are economically independent but they have hardly any time or ability to seek information. Whatever they learn is through oral wisdom of the family hierarchy. The family hierarchical structure again gives a very diverse picture in the family relationship of women. The eldest woman or the matriarch is the epitome of wisdom and all information is sought from her. Her information is also gathered from the previous generation. Therefore, generation after generation it is the oral information which is sought and given. Inter personal communication is most important and that generally happens within the family or within a community. The women of the rural poor do not enjoy economic security because most of them work in the unorganized sector i.e., the lowest rung in the economic ladder. Many of them have skills in rural craft and are part of the family activity. The wages and other facilities in the agricultural, forestry and other sectors are discriminatory and there is no fixed relationship between the employer and the employee. It is unlikely that the women of this group will make efforts to seek information outside their restricted boundaries.

The role of librarian and information professional

With such a diverse spectrum of information seeking environment it is very difficult to pin down the exact type of library or exact type of librarian needed to cater to information for all women of such a diverse social structure. However, in the Indian situation we need the following:

Well-developed modern library and information dissemination facilities

i) The role of librarian/information officer will call for a workable blend of a traditional librarian and electronic media savvy information generator and disseminator. Well-organized libraries are necessary in the academic sector, special libraries in scientific & research sector and government sector to cater to the needs of the scholarly, sophisticated and well-informed women. There is seldom any special requirement because the realm of multifarious activities

undertaken by women of this group deal mainly with development and other spheres of national/regional goals.

Public libraries in the new information seeking environment

ii) Well equipped public libraries and information centers are essential support systems in the information environment for all types of urban and semi urban women specially those who are out of the formal employment and academic circles. A public librarian must be able to empathise with the hesitant and often confused women information seekers. He/she should be personally gender sensitized to be able to handle a new type of clientele which has so far been mainly dependent on traditional and family oriented information.

In many areas, public libraries will have to set up a special area exclusively for women because women of traditional background are not allowed to utilize facilities common to men and women. The libraries have to keep a broad spectrum of information sources to cater to information requirement for traditional womanly pursuits as well as education and career orientation, legal rights and aid, job opportunities etc.

Information/communication centre at the rural level

iii) The most challenging role of the library professional will be in the rural sector. The literacy level among women is very low and in many parts of India it is abysmal. The librarian will have to be a communicator and not a librarian in the traditional sense. He/she has to climb down from the ivory tower where literacy and formal education can be taken for granted. The rural women have economic role as well as traditional familial roles. The library-cum information/communication centre must be equipped with necessary information in different media i.e., printed material for the neo literates, audio visual and electronic material for those who are not comfortable with the written word. The information professional must be aware of the local needs and furnish necessary information in comprehensible language and content. Oral and visual communication will be the most important mode of information transfer. Physically, the centre must be easily approachable to women who may have the chance to visit. To a large majority, the required information may have to reach the clientele in different innovative repackaged forum which is within the comprehension level of women.

Right to Information

Right to information is of great interest and debate in all of South Asia. A detailed legislation on this issue which spells out instruction for implementation is the need of the hour. There have been efforts in all these countries to funnel information through governmental and non-governmental channels. Even a relevant bill was drafted in India entitled 'Freedom of Information Bill, 1997' but it has not been enacted as yet. In this

debate, the information need of women as a special group should be spelt out. In all the countries of South Asia other than the problem of illiteracy the complex barrier of multiple languages and religious diversity make information generation, information repackaging and dissemination even more challenging, specially among women. Therefore, if Right to Information has to be fructified, the automatic corollary will be Information Management in the right perspective and in the right manner. The role of librarians is crucial in this new environment.

Need for Research

The urgent need to study the information needs and the information seeking behaviour of women of diverse situations and backgrounds has to be understood by academicians, activists as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations. National and international efforts have to be channelized in that direction without any more delay.